

TITLE:

## Exploring boundaries in the hybrid environment

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In this paper, we explore how individuals negotiate boundaries in environments with varying degrees of hybridity and we explore the role of the hybrid in this. Boundaries constitute a topical issue as workers move to more flexible, project-based work arrangements (Yeow, 2014). Organizations, for example, are increasingly seen as ‘boundaryless’, as traditional boundaries have been overcome by new configurations, such as virtual teams, which traverse geographical, temporal and organizational boundaries (Ashkenas, 2002). Scholars argue, however, that, as a result of these flatter, more linear, forms of organizing, other boundaries have emerged, both at the organizational—e.g. cultural boundaries, due to the increased heterogeneity often characterizing virtual organizations (Orlikowski, 2002)—and the individual levels—e.g. silent (yet existing) boundaries, created by ‘silenced unavailability’ or by giving impressions of ‘not wanting to be disturbed’ in asynchronous virtual environments (Panteli, 2004, p. 74). These studies show that, though boundaries seem to be more flattened in the virtual environment, they exist in different forms and have significant implications for the way work is carried out.

The recent literature on work-life balance agrees that, as technology advances, individuals increasingly have the choice to render work-life boundaries less fixed and highly permeable (Duxbury, Higgins, Smart, & Stevenson, 2014; Mustafa & Gold, 2013). However, despite some useful accounts around examinations of boundaries between work life and personal life (e.g. Sayah, 2013), it has been recently suggested that work-life balance may not be relevant anymore (Dén-Nagy, 2014).

We use the term ‘hybrid’ to refer to an environment in which (a) the virtual and the corporeal coexist and interact; and (b) work-life, among other, boundaries are largely blurred (Jordan, 2009). Contrary to literature focusing on exclusively virtual contexts, neglecting what occurs outside the virtual, our approach is more pragmatic in that it considers both the virtual and the corporeal, and takes a close look into our participants’ lives not only at work, but also outside work. Our aim is to explore the role of the hybrid in abolishing, constructing, managing and negotiating emergent or existing forms of boundaries that are found in environments.

In view of that—and in response to recent calls for event-based research studies within the literature on boundaries (Allen, Cho, & Meier, 2014)—we conducted a study with 45 UK-based participants, involving weeklong video diaries and follow-up interviews. We focused on 45 individuals whose lives are characterized by varying degrees of hybridity (15 social entrepreneurs, 15 students and 15 office workers) in our effort to understand the role of the hybrid in negotiating boundaries. On the one hand, social entrepreneurs and students worked (or studied) in highly hybrid environments (e.g. due to their flexibility in terms of office location and working hours). On the other hand, office workers, though largely office-bound, utilized some form of flexible working as well.

Our thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), utilizing QSR NVivo 10, is still ongoing and has begun to explore how our participants negotiate boundaries in the hybrid environment. In what follows, we provide examples of boundaries found in the hybrid environment from our preliminary analysis.

### *Creating digital boundaries*

We identified digital boundaries that the participants created to separate their different activities, to categorize their hobbies, to speak to different audiences (on social media), and to manage their different identities:

“So my personal account will be my... what I’m interested in personally. So I have a Food Blog, as well, I do a lot of cooking and kind of stuff like that, so a lot of my Twitter or Instagram will be filled up with pictures of nice restaurants, or stuff I’ve cooked. It wouldn’t be appropriate for our [corporate account] to be tweeting photos of what I’ve just had for dinner.” (Anna, social entrepreneur, interview)

*Restoring traditional boundaries*

Despite the recognition that certain traditional boundaries disappear in the hybrid environment, our participants were found to put some of them back in place. For instance, Leanne, an office worker, explained that she used different apps on her tablet to separate her work from her non-work emails:

“No, not at all. I did [merge the two] at one point, but I didn’t like it. It wasn’t comfortable because I was getting... I like to keep that separation to my personal emails and my work emails very much. It’s just a preference that I have, really.” (Leanne, office worker, interview)

So far, our findings suggest that the hybrid does not only blur boundaries, but can also act as an enabler for individuals to restore traditional boundaries, thus challenging and problematizing existing views in the literature. Further, our study goes beyond an exploration of boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘life’, by exploring boundaries which sit above those two domains, which we are hoping to present in more detail at the conference, highlighting implications for both theory and practice.